

Domestic violence and your safety

What is domestic and family violence?

Domestic and family violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour. It is the use of violence and abuse by one person to gain and maintain power over another person with whom they are in a close personal or family relationship.

Domestic and family violence:

- occurs in many types of relationships. This includes between partners or ex-partners who have been married or in de facto relationships, between children and parents, in same-sex relationships, towards older people, and between people sharing a home
- can happen regardless of culture, race, background, income level, age group, social status, abilities, sexual preference or religion
- is not an ordinary relationship problem or anger management issue. The abusive person is responsible for their actions. Physical or sexual assaults are a crime whether they happen in your home or on the street
- can make you feel uncomfortable, scared and unsafe. It can be subtle or blatant.

Domestic and family violence may include the following sorts of behaviour:

Psychological or emotional abuse: For example, attempts to make you feel worthless or afraid, using intimidation, threats to hurt you, your children or your pets, or threats of suicide.

Physical abuse: This is the use of violence to hurt, control or intimidate you. This may include hitting, punching, slapping, kicking, strangling or using weapons.

Sexual abuse: This is the use of sex as a way to control, hurt and intimidate you. This may include sexual assault, forcing you to view pornography, or participate in other unwanted sexual acts.

Financial abuse: This includes restricting access to money, threatening to withdraw financial support or making you responsible for debts that are not your own. This can affect your ability to care for your family or leave an abusive relationship.

Social control: This includes controlling your activities or isolating you from family, friends and the community by restricting access to family or cultural events and activities like religious meetings or education.

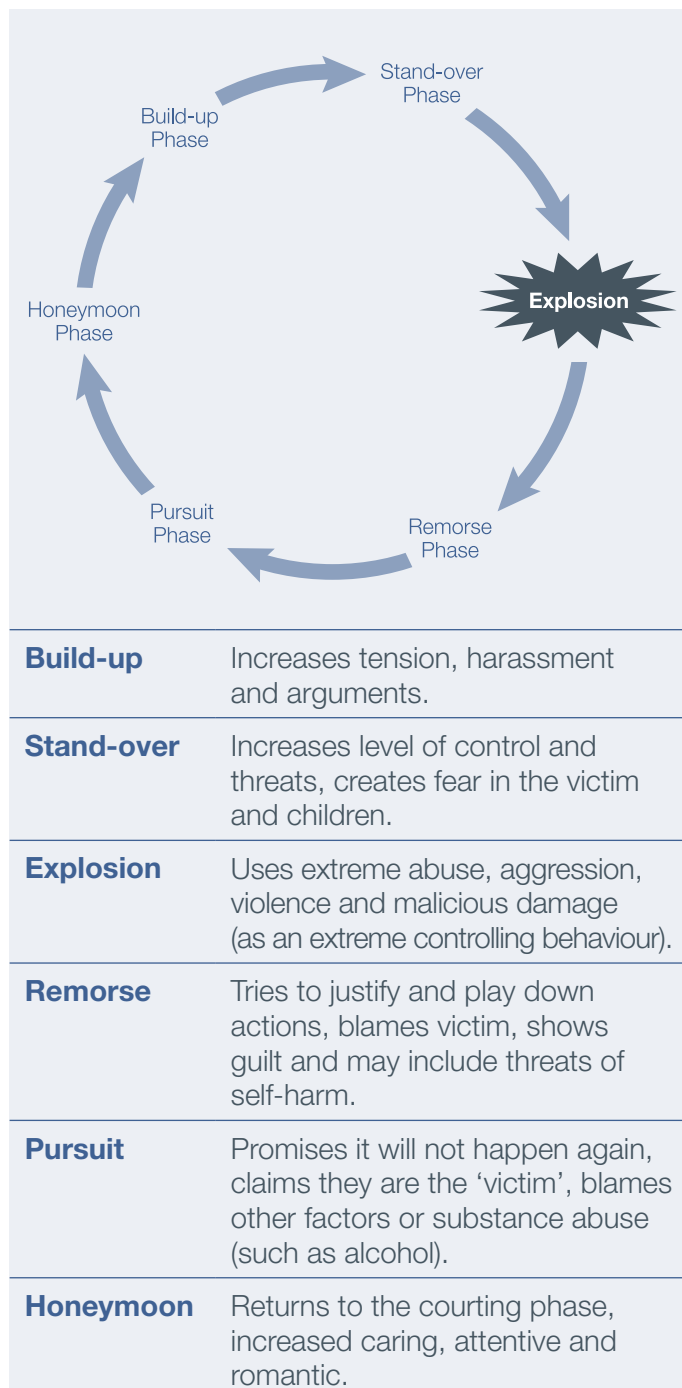
Stalking: This is when a person follows or watches you, or visits places where they know you will be, to try to monitor your whereabouts and intimidate you.

Intimidation: This is abusive behaviour to make you fearful. It can be obvious or subtle. It includes threatening statements, looks or gestures, or other behaviour that makes you feel afraid.

Harassment: This is repeated unwanted contact by the abusive person. It can include contact made directly, by phone, email or on social networking websites, or through another person.

The dynamics of domestic and family violence

Some people can find it helpful to understand domestic violence as a cycle of behaviour. The 'cycle of violence'¹ explains the behaviour and tactics an abusive person might use to control you and your children. The violence moves between relative calm and an explosion of abuse. In reality, the phases can be in different combinations, order, levels of intensity or overlapping, so this model may not show your experience exactly.



The impact of domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence can have wide-ranging and long-term effects on a person's physical, emotional and mental health and well-being. People who suffer domestic violence may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, disrupted eating patterns, feel that life is not worth living or use/overuse substances such as drugs, cigarettes or alcohol to manage the pain of being abused.

Many people who have experienced domestic and family violence say that one of the hardest things to deal with is 'what it does to your head', as the person abusing you uses emotional abuse to undermine your self belief. It can help to talk to people who are experienced in working with victims of domestic and family violence. They can help you to talk about the abuse and think through the best options for you and your family. It can also help to have workers advocate on your behalf as you negotiate other services and systems to regain your safety.

Experiencing domestic and family violence can also have social or other effects, including limiting education and job opportunities, the loss of secure housing and income, and separation from your community and support network.

People who experience family violence can sometimes have difficulty in seeking help, because of fear of the abusive person, uncertainty over what might happen if the relationship ends, concern for the children, worries about practical issues like housing, employment, transport and childcare, pressure from others to stay in the relationship, or because they want to keep their relationship but have the violence stop.

1. Dr Lenore Walker, *The Battered Woman*, 1980, Harper and Row, New York.

The impact of domestic and family violence on children

Domestic and family violence and the threat of violence at home creates fear and harms normal family life. Children and young people don't have to see the violence to be affected by it.

There are a number of ways that children are affected by domestic and family violence. Children might:

- witness the violence (this includes both seeing and hearing the violence)
- be physically and emotionally abused themselves or hurt while attempting to intervene
- be threatened or abused as a way of hurting or intimidating the other parent
- be deliberately alienated from or used to abuse their parent by the abusive parent
- become isolated from extended family, peer and broader support networks
- lose a connection with their parent as their energy may be focused on surviving the violence.

For children to develop well, they need a secure and nurturing environment. In a home where there is domestic and family violence it is not safe or secure. Children can be scared about what might happen to them and the people they love.

Children who witness domestic and family violence can be more likely to have behaviour problems, develop insomnia, have anxiety or depression, diminished self-esteem and poorer academic performance. They may also have health problems.

You can help your children to heal from the impact of domestic violence. They will benefit from lots of attention and affection, and from talking to you and others to help them make sense of the violence. Some important messages to tell children and young people are that:

- the violence is not their fault
- feeling sad or angry is understandable and normal
- they can talk to you about the violence or anything else that they are concerned about, and that you will take action together

- plan with them where they should go, and what they should do if they are afraid for your safety or their own

- they should not try to intervene.

There are services that can assist you to support your children. For help contact your local family support service or child health service.

Assessing the risk of future violence

When making decisions about your safety, it is important to consider the risk of further violence. Domestic and family violence support services can help you understand the risk posed by the abusive person.

When thinking about your risk of future violence you should ask yourself the following:

Is there an immediate threat of violence? If the abusive person has made direct or recent threats (physical, verbal or implied), threatened suicide, or made threats towards your children, these must be taken very seriously. Call '000' if you are in immediate danger. Otherwise, discuss the threats with a police officer or call the Domestic Violence Liaison Officer (DVLO) at your local police station.

How much does the abusive person attempt to control you? Consider how much they attempt to control you and isolate you from friends and family, whether they have stalked you, or made threats to harm you or your children if you leave. Abusive people who are highly controlling and jealous can be very dangerous if they think they are losing control of you. For example, they may increase their abuse because you have left them, started a new relationship or taken legal action.

How dangerous is the abusive person's behaviour? If there is a history of physical or sexual violence, or the person has access to weapons, tried or threatened to kill you or anyone else, or the violence is escalating, there is a high risk of future and serious violence.

Are there factors that may increase the chance of the abusive person being violent? This could include things like excessive drinking, untreated mental illness or jealousy. These are not direct causes of violence, but can lead to a higher risk.

Are your children vulnerable to the abuse? Domestic and family violence has serious effects on children of all ages, including witnessing domestic violence, and being hurt by the abusive person. Being pregnant can also increase your vulnerability.

Are you fearful? Your fear of the abusive person is a good indicator that something is wrong, and should not be ignored. If anything causes you to become more fearful, it is important that you take immediate action by contacting police.

Are there factors that make it more difficult for you to get away from the abuse? This could include factors like living with a disability, being isolated, or financially dependent on the abusive person.

Safety planning

It is important for you to think about strategies you can use to try to improve your safety, and that these strategies suit your individual circumstances. Your strategies will be different if you are still in an abusive relationship or experiencing abuse after separation. For example, if you are separated you may need to change the locks on your home.

It can be helpful to work out a plan of what you might do if you are in danger. Your safety plan should look at what you can do to lower the risk of violence reoccurring and prepare for when it happens. You should also decide how to help yourself and your children in an emergency.

Some key things that you can do to increase your safety:

- Let people know what is happening, so that they can support you. This includes friends, family and police or domestic violence support services. Ask your neighbours to call the police if they hear a disturbance at your home.
- Report all instances of abuse to the police. Keep in touch with your DVLO and let them know if further abuse has occurred.
Remember call '000' if you are in immediate danger.
- Always have a way of contacting police in an emergency. For example, keep a mobile phone with you.
- Keep a diary or record of contacts with the abusive person. Save any abusive text or voice messages and report these to the police.
- Talk to a domestic violence support worker who will help you develop a safety plan.

Information about where to get help and support is available in *Your Court, Your Safety* online at www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/cpd